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THE ... FORTUNE HUNTER.

Novelized by Louis Joseph Vance
From the Play of the Same Name
by Winchel Smith

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CHAPTER XXII.
But at the doorstep of the Methodist church Nat hesitated. The building was dimly lighted, and the door was ajar, but he couldn't bring himself to enter. Heaving and ranting with the extravagance of youth, he passed through the village, out into the open country, and, in the course of an hour and a half, back, all blindly, circling back to the store, in the course of his wanderings, as instinctively as a carrier pigeon shapes its course for home.

It was with incredulity that he found himself again in that cheerful, cheerless, homely place. But there he was, there in those familiar surroundings, there in Tracey's round red face beaming at him over the clear stand behind a lively counterfeiter of the round red wood he had watched lift up into the sky, just as he paused to turn back to town.

He recollected his faculties and resumed command of himself sufficiently to acknowledge Tracey's greeting with a moody word.

"All right, Tracey," he said abruptly. "You may go now. I'll shut up the store."

He looked at his watch and was surprised to discover that it was no later than half past 8. He seemed to have lived a lifetime in the last few hours.

"Thank you, sir," said Tracey, with a flush of gratitude. "I'll be glad to get off. Angle's waitin'."

"Angle?"

"Good evening, Mr. Duncan."

"Oh, Miss Tutill!" Nat discovered that little rogue, all smiles, round dimples and blishes, not distant from his elbow. "I didn't see you—I was thinking."

"Guess we know what you was thinkin' about," observed Tracey, bringing his hat round the counter. "Everybody in town's talkin' about it."

"About what?"

"Ah, you know about what, and we're mighty glad of it, and we want to congratulate you, don't we, Angle?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, Mr. Duncan. It's just too sweet for anything."

"O Lord!" groaned Nat.

"I'm awful glad you done it when you did," pursued Tracey, oblivious to Nat in his own ecstatic temper. "I guess I wouldn't never 've got up the spunk to tell Angle what I did to-night 'f it hadn't been we was talkin' 'bout your engagement to Josie. Then, somehow, it just seemed to bust right out of me, like I couldn't hold it no longer. Didn't it, Angle?"

"Oh, Tracey, how can you talk so!"

"Then you're engaged, too?" Nat inquired, rousing himself a little and smiling feebly upon them.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm glad to hear it. It's great news. Now, run along, both of you, and don't forget you'll never be so happy again. I wish I wouldn't never 've got up the spunk to tell Angle what I did to-night 'f it hadn't been we was talkin' 'bout your engagement to Josie. Then, somehow, it just seemed to bust right out of me, like I couldn't hold it no longer. Didn't it, Angle?"

"Oh, you're here!" he cried, with a distinct start of relief. "I've been looking all over for you."

"I just got in." Nat brushed aside explanations curtly, intent upon his purpose. "Harry, I've got something to say to you. I'm not going through with this thing."

"You're not?"

"No, and that's final. I was just on the point of drawing you a check for three hundred—that's all my share of the profits of this concern so far—and

"It's just too sweet for anything," my note for the balance. I'll pay that up as soon as I'm able, and I'll work like a terrier until it do. But, as for the rest of it, I'm through."

"Oh, you are?" Kellogg took a chair and tipped back, frowning gravely. "But what about your word to me?"

"There's nothing to that," said Duncan without heat. "The word of honor of a man who'd stoop to a trick as vile as I have doesn't amount to a continental shipplaster. I'll rather be dishonored by breaking it than by ruining a woman's life."

"Very well, if you feel that way about it," said Kellogg as coolly. "And you may keep your check and note. I wouldn't take them. You can pay me back when it's convenient—I don't care when. But what I want to know is what you mean to do."

I know you haven't but Graham insisted you owned the whole thing. I pressed him for an explanation, and he finally furnished one in his rambling, inconsequent, fine old way. He admitted that there wasn't any sort of existing contract or agreement of any kind, even oral, between you, but

"Aha! What'd I tell you?" This was Roland's triumphant cry.

"Nat!" Josie advanced, trembling with excitement. "Tell me, what does this mean?"

Duncan perforce avoided her gaze. "Don't ask," he said sadly.

"Is it true?" she insisted. "You heard what Roly said," he replied, with a chastened expression.

"Then you admit it?"

"I admit nothing!"

"Oh-h!" The girl drew away from him as from defilement. "I—I hate you!" she cried in a voice of loathing.

"That's all right," he told her serenely. "I've despised myself all evening."

The girl showed him a scornful back. "Papa!" she began.

"Don't thank me, Josie. Roland done it all. He got on to him." Lockwood continued to watch Duncan with the air of a cat eyeing a mouse.

Impulsively Josie moved to Roland's side and caught his arm. He drew himself up proudly.

"I do thank you, Roland. I can never be grateful enough. I've been so foolish."

"That's all right," Roland tucked the girl's hand beneath his arm and patted it down. "You wasn't to blame. I never seen any one from New York yet that wasn't a crook."

"Won't you please take me away from this place, Roland?" she appealed.

"I'll be mighty glad to see you home, Josie," he assured her generously, turning.

In the act of leaving Josie caught Nat's eye. She hung back for an instant.

"Fifty thousand cash and 10,000 shares of preferred stock—\$100 par."

"What's that worth?"

"At the market rate when I left town '78," Kellogg waited a moment. "Well, what do you say?"

"Say? Great Caesar's ghost! What is there to say? Wire 'em an acceptance before they get their second wind. You don't know how good this makes me feel, Harry. I can't thank you enough for what you've done. This'll square me with Graham to some extent, and I can clear out."

"No, you can't, Mr. Smarty! You ain't been cute enough."

Both men, startled by the interruption, wheeled round to discover Roland Barnett dancing with excitement in the doorway, the while he beckoned frantically to an invisible party without.

"Come on!" he shouted. "Here he is!"

"What's eating you, Roly Poly?" inquired Nat, too happy for the money to cherish animosity even toward his one time rival.

"You'll find out soon enough," snarled Roland. "Mr. Lockwood's got something to say to you, I guess."

And on the heels of this announcement Lockwood strode into the store, Josie clinging to his arm, Pete Willing following more sanely drunk than he had been some hours previous—bringing up the rear.

"So," snarled Blinky, halting and transfixing Nat with the stare of his cold blue eyes—"so we've found you, eh?"

"Oh? I didn't know I was lost."

"No nonsense, young man. I ain't in the humor for foolin'." Blinky was unquestionably in no sort of humor at all beyond an evil one. "I come here to have a word with you."

"Well, sir?" Nat's tone and attitude were perfectly pacific.

"Ah, there ain't no use beatin' round the bush. You've behaved yourself ever since you come to Radville and insoxiated yourself into our confidence, spite of the fact that nobody in town knows who you are before

you come. But now Roland's laid a charge agin you, and I want to know the rights to it."

"Well, Roland interposed coolly. "I accused him of it tonight, and he didn't deny it."

"What's more," Lockwood continued, with rising color, "Roland says he can prove it."

"Prove what?" Nat insisted. "Get down to facts, can't you?"

"That you're a thief, with a reward out for you," said Roland. "You're that Mortimer Henry what absconded from the Longacre National bank in New York."

There fell a brief pause. Nat bowed his head and tugged at his mustache, his shoulders shaking with emotion variously construed by those who watched him. Presently he looked up again, his features gravely composed.

"Roly," said he, "Balaam must miss you terribly."

"That ain't no answer," Lockwood put himself solidly between Nat and the object of his obscure remark, who was painfully digesting it. "I want to know about this. You got my daughter to say she'd marry you this evening, and you've got to explain to me

He hurried up the path, tortured by impatience, fear, longing, despair. Then he saw what seemed at first a pale shadow detach itself from darker shades in the shrubbery and move toward him.

"Nat, is it you?"

"Betty!"

His whole heart was in that cry. The girl thrilled to its timbre as though a master hand had struck a chord upon her heartstrings.

"Nat, what is it?"

"Betty, I want to tell you something."

She came very slowly toward him, torn alternately by fear and hope. What did he mean?

"I do you happen to remember that I told you awhile ago I was engaged to Josie Lockwood?"

"Nat! Could I forget? Why?"

"Because it's broken off, Betty."

"Broken off? How? Why?"

"Because it had to be sweetheart—because I love you."

She was very close to him then. Her uplifted face shone like marble in the fading light.

"Nat, I—I don't understand."

"Then listen. I must tell you. It was all a plan, a scheme, my coming here, Betty. Everything I did, said, thought, was part of a contemptible trick. I meant to marry Josie Lockwood, whom I'd never seen, for her money. Now you know what I was, dear. But it's different now. I'm not the same man who came to Radville ten months ago. I've learned a little more about the right. I hope. I've learned to love and reverence goodness and purity and unselfishness, and—and I want to be a man, the kind of man you thought me, a man worthy of you and your love, Betty, because I love you. I want you to be my wife. And—oh, Betty, Betty—I need you to help me!"

His voice broke. He waited, every nerve and fiber of him tense for her answer. While he had been speaking the onrush of the storm had blotted out the sun. There was only dark darkness in the garden—deep, dense darkness—so thick he could not even see the shimmer of her dress.

Then suddenly she was in his arms, shaking and sobbing, straining him to her.

"Oh, Nat, my Nat! I've loved you from the first day I ever saw you! You know I have."

"Betty—sweetheart!"

There came an abrupt, furious patter of heavy drops of water beating upon the foliage, splashing and rebounding from the leaves of the trees.

"Forever and ever, Nat!"

"Forever and ever and a day, my dear—my dear!"

A little later an anxious voice—old Sam's—halted them from the house, but was drowned by the downpour. They were as unconscious of it as of the storm.

So that presently old Sam had to run down the path with a big umbrella to shield them until they should come to their senses.

THE END.

IMPROVING THE SEED.

A Story With a Moral That Is Well Worth Consideration.

Margie Hill believed in "store things" as unreservedly as her husband believed in them. Bought at the store, an article, to her mind, possessed an excellent unknown in the home product. For example, canned tomatoes, with a paper band picturing an enormous red ponderosa, she esteemed more highly than the fresh vegetable raised by Sam in their own kitchen-garden.

One spring Sam was sorting out seed potatoes from the last year's crop, when she pounced upon him and declared that the potatoes were small, warty, ill-flavored, and in every respect unfit to plant, and that he was an ignorant and unprogressive farmer unless he drove four miles to Bloomfield and purchased some fancy seed.

Sam grumbled, but after she had returned to her housework he conscientiously filled two barrels from the bin and hauled them to trade, as "ratine" potatoes, for the improved "seed."

A new merchant, it proved, had bought out the store. His shipments would arrive the next day. He accepted the customer's barrels at fifty cents a bushel, and Sam would come back on the morrow to make his desired purchase.

But it happened that Sam was detained at home. He helped Margie in and off, and saw her drive to the backroad, and saw her drive off, and cleaned, to finish his misadventure. Late in the evening she turned in at the barn-tot gate, dusty, but triumphant and happy.

"Well, Sam," she cried, cheerily, "I got 'em! And I warrant you'll be glad you took my advice. It's the finest lot I nearly ever saw."

"That's good," said Sam. "How many barrels, I didn't want so many, but he wouldn't break the lot, as he had no more of the variety. I was glad that it was a whole shedful there were none as good as these."

Sam was unbiting the potatoes, while his wife, from the seat as a pulchritudinous would have entered into him, but he checked it.

"I believe that's a fancy price you're putting on 'em," he objected, doubtfully. "Well, he did," admitted Margie. "A dollar and a half a bushel. His enthusiasm ebbed. 'So! Hand me one. Let's see it. Is it pure gold, then?' 'You needn't be so good-sized potato from the top of a barrel. You needn't buy about it,' she said, slightly nettled. 'They're as good as gold. And there's a finer one farther down.' Sam turned the sample over and over in his hands. His brow wrinkled. 'No, he didn't. But I know they're a good kind. Every one is perfect.' 'I believe that's a fancy price you're putting on 'em,' he objected, doubtfully. 'Well, he did,' admitted Margie. 'A dollar and a half a bushel. His enthusiasm ebbed. 'So! Hand me one. Let's see it. Is it pure gold, then?' 'You needn't be so good-sized potato from the top of a barrel. You needn't buy about it,' she said, slightly nettled. 'They're as good as gold. And there's a finer one farther down.' 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